

**VISITOR SATISFACTION AND
VISITOR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
ACADIA NATIONAL PARK: 2002**

Meeting the Requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act



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November 2002
Acadia National Park Natural Resources Report Number 2002-09**

SUMMARY

In 2002, the National Park Service measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of the park they were visiting through a brief visitor survey. Acadia National Park participated in this survey, which was intended to meet the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). The response rate for the survey was 23%.

In a brief report, the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit presented the results of visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreation opportunities (GPRA goal IIa1) at Acadia. One hundred percent of visitors were satisfied with the overall quality of visitor facilities, services, and recreation opportunities offered by Acadia. This was above the GPRA servicewide goal of 95%. Responses to questions about the quality of specific facilities or services showed there is room for limited improvement.

Visitor responses to the question about the significance of Acadia National Park (GPRA goal IIb1) were compared to significance statements identified in the park's GPRA plan. According to servicewide standards for evaluating answers to this question (visitor identification of at least one park significance item), 93% of Acadia visitors understand something about the significance of Acadia. This is well above the servicewide standard of 84%. Sixty-seven percent of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its scenery and 34% percent knew it was significant for its recreation opportunities. Fourteen percent of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its cultural heritage and 12% knew it was significant for its natural resources.

When given the opportunity to make other comments, visitors offered the following ideas more than once: not enough ranger programs; friendly, helpful staff; water fountains needed; showers needed in campgrounds; love the buses. There were few comments about crowding and congestion or resource management activities. Two comments stated that trail work at Ship Harbor and Jordan Pond was too much/too intrusive. One visitor apparently was quite lost, saying "Great job, Canada."

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INTRODUCTION

In 2002, the National Park Service (NPS) measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of Acadia National Park through a brief survey card administered to a representative sample of visitors. Satisfaction and understanding of significance had been identified as two important servicewide goals established by the NPS to satisfy the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In this report, data from the Visitor Survey Card Data Report (see Appendix 1) prepared by the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit will be reviewed briefly. The Idaho report presents the results of very general visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. We also present and analyze the results for the open-ended part of the survey card that asks visitors to tell why Acadia is significant and to give any other comments they wish.

METHODS

The University of Idaho established survey methods for all park units. At Acadia, four hundred survey cards were distributed on eight days between August 1 and August 31, at eight different locations (fifty cards for each). The locations have stayed the same since beginning the GPRA surveys in 1998. Distribution of cards was evenly divided between weekends and weekdays, and between two blocks of time, 8:00 a.m. to noon and 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Locations, days, dates, and times are shown in Table 1.

We selected sampling sites mainly for their high visitation, but there were several other considerations. Because of the division of the park and Mount Desert Island into an east and west side, we chose five locations on the more heavily visited east side and two on the less visited west side. The eighth location was made up of both Blackwoods Campground on the east side and Seawall Campground on the west side. Twenty-five survey cards were distributed in each campground.

Three locations on the east side were high use frontcountry sites. The other two locations were high use backcountry trail and carriage road sites. The carriage road intersection selected was between the high and low use areas on the carriage road system (see Jacobi and Manning 1997). The trail junction selected represents moderately difficult to difficult trails with high use. One of the high use frontcountry sites on the east side, Jordan Pond, was selected because of the concession there and the multitude of activities available (hiking, biking, and boating). On the west side, Echo Lake Beach was selected because it is a high use frontcountry area. The primary activity there is visiting the beach and a secondary activity is hiking. Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trails were selected because they are easy trails and they represent the frontcountry users of the Rt. 102A corridor with its easily accessible park attractions.

National protocols for distribution of survey cards call for contacting visitors on a frequency of every third person or vehicle if more than 100 persons or vehicles were expected in the four hours, and every person or vehicle if less than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours (see

Table 1). This protocol was followed with the following exceptions. Where vehicular or foot traffic was heavy, we spread surveys out over the entire 4-hour period, instead of every third party. A time interval every five minutes of was used. Distribution was also adjusted from every third group to every group or vice versa when flows were inconsistent. Two hundred surveys were distributed by the Recreation Intern. Each Ridgerunner distributed 50.

TABLE 1: LOCATION, DAY, AND TIME FOR 2002 GPRA CARD DISTRIBUTION.

Location	Date/Day	Time	Frequency
Entrance Station	8/03/02, Saturday	8:00 – 12:00	12/hour
Visitor Center	8/04/02, Sunday	8:00 – 12:00	12/hour
Echo Lake Beach parking lot	8/05/02, Monday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Jordan Pond Area parking lots	8/08/02, Thursday	1:00 – 5:00	12/hour, all lots
Ship Harbor/Wonderland Trails	8/12/02, Monday	1:00 – 5:00	every
Beehive and Bowl Trail Jct.	8/15/02, Thursday	1:00 – 5:00	every
Seawall and Blackwoods	8/17/02, Saturday	8:00 – 12:00	BW 3rd
Campgrounds			SW 3rd
Intersection 10, carriage roads	8/18/02, Sunday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd
Echo Lake Beach parking lot	8/08/02, Thursday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd

RESULTS

VISITOR SATISFACTION (GPRA GOAL IIA1)

The data presented in Visitor Survey Card Data Report from the University of Idaho report is mostly self-explanatory (see Appendix 1 for details). The response rate was 23% (90/400 survey cards). This rate is comparable to similar survey cards in the private sector and is considered adequate. The most important result was that 100% of visitors were satisfied overall with the quality of appropriate facilities, services, and recreation opportunities. This is above the National Park Service 2002 GPRA goal of 95%. The data are accurate to plus or minus 6% with 95% confidence. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar (+/- 6%) 95 out of 100 times.

Visitor satisfaction with restroom facilities, exhibits, and commercial services in the park had the lowest overall evaluation scores (4.2 to 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 5). A score of 4 out of 5 is still very good.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA (GPRA GOAL IIB1)

One of the open-ended survey questions asked, “What is the special significance of this park?” Visitors could respond by writing in as many items as they wished. Their answers were classified according to a series of four significance statements prepared for the Acadia National Park GPRA plan (National Park Service 1997). We revised these significance statements slightly based on visitor responses in 1998 and 2001 (2001 revisions are in *italics* below). These

significance statements were followed closely. Exact wording was not necessary, but the concept had to be readily apparent from the visitor's choice of words. This was not always obvious or easy, but most statements clearly fell into one category. If a statement contained one or more ideas that were different, both were used in the analysis.

1. **Outstanding scenery** – glaciated coastal and island landscape – mountains meet the sea – highest topography along the East coast of North America – Some Sound the only fjord in the continental U.S. – *geography* – preservation from development, especially the coastline – geology (as relates to topography) – tides.
2. **Recreation Opportunities** – many activities available – carriage roads, trails, hiking, biking, boating – scenic motor roads – park accessible to all users – public shoreline access – peace/quiet/solitude – *learning/education*.
3. **Rich cultural heritage** – Native American history – French and British settlement – history of park formation, large land donations, visible proponents of conservation – historic hiking trails – historic carriage roads.
4. **Biological/Ecological (Natural) resources** – any mention of flora or fauna - exceptionally high biological diversity – presence of numerous rare species – unique mix of plant species that are at their northern and southern range limits – abundant wetlands – variety of habitats and communities – *clean air and water*.

We counted the number of surveys with any response related to significance, even if it was not included in our significance statements. Responses not related to significance and non-responses were discarded from analysis. Of the responses related to significance, we then counted those matching at least one of the four significance statements. Ninety-three percent of surveys with responses to this question had at least one match (68/73). The percentage of surveys with one, two, three, or four matches are shown in Table 2. Results from previous years are included for comparison.

**TABLE 2: PERCENT OF RESPONSES MATCHING
ONE, TWO, THREE, OR FOUR ACADIA SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENTS***

Number of Matches	1998 (n=81)	1999 (n=126)	2000 (n=94)	2001 (n=72)	2002 (n=68)
At least one match	82%	89%	91%	94%	93%
At least two matches	21%	36%	39%	42%	33%
At least three matches	1%	4%	3%	4%	0%
Four matches	0%	<1%	0%	0%	0%

*The percentages in Table 2 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

Five years of data consistently show that visitors most often recognize Acadia is significant for its scenery, followed by recognition of its recreation opportunities.

Recognition of the park's rich cultural heritage and natural resources is much less common. Table 3 shows the details. Appendix 2 contains the verbatim significance responses.

TABLE 3: PERCENT OF RESPONSES WITH SPECIFIC MATCHES TO ACADIA SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENTS FOR SCENERY, RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND NATURAL RESOURCES*

Significance Statements	1998 (n=81)	1999 (n=112)	2000 (n=94)	2001 (n=72)	2002 (n=68)
Scenery	67%	74%	74%	82%	67%
Recreation	31%	40%	33%	29%	34%
Cultural Heritage	3%	9%	15%	10%	14%
Natural Resources	6%	8%	14%	8%	12%

*The percentages in Table 3 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

SUMMARY OF OTHER COMMENTS

Visitors provided many comments in the final section of the survey card. We established eight categories of comments as described below and grouped comments in the appropriate categories, although there is always a little judgment involved in this. Multiple/independent comments on each survey were classified separately. Under each heading, visitor comments are reported verbatim. A semi-colon separates the comments of each individual.

Facilities and Services

We've been coming for years. Please keep up the facilities; Everyone was very friendly and helpful with info for us; The younger rangers need to be more knowledgeable about what animals and plant life is in the park; The personnel here have been exceptionally knowledgeable, helpful, and friendly. Thank you; Some trails need work; Too many cutbacks-not quite as clean or well maintained or enough interpreters/programs. Nonprofits taking up some slack; Not enough ranger led programs for the number of people. Plumbing in Seawall Campground is terrible; Your staff are extremely helpful and friendly. The services (buses, rest rooms etc.) are fantastic; You have lots of great educational programs that were scheduled too early in the day to take advantage of, e.g. bridges, Otter walk; More historical and geological exhibits would help the visitor center; Park employees were excellent; Maps need to be more clear as to directions on hiking and biking trails; Carriage paths need to be better marked and a specific map of paths (just paths) would help; The facilities are fine; Acadia is a very well kept, well marked, beautiful place to visit. Thank you; Great hiking trails and carriage roads; Repair rest rooms; The free map was very poor, not showing much detail. The ranger programs should be expanded to allow more people to participate. In five days we could not get to participate in 2 of the popular programs; The trail markings outside "the Loop" is not very clear. Sometimes confusing (Lower Hadlock Point);

Services Needed

No water on carriage trails; The park needs water fountains; ; More parking; A mileage guide on the map; Color code trails and map markings. More public water fountains; No earrings to buy (smiley face); Cleaner and larger restroom facilities; We love to visit. More toilets on the carriage trails would be nice; Need trails for mountain bikes, and places to swim that are only bike accessible, for example Jordan Pond; Better washing facilities in the campgrounds (cold showers); Have someone at each entrance to collect fees. You are probably losing 90% of revenue due to one collection booth. The majority of the park can be seen w/o paying admission; Needs more campsites;

Concessions

Gift shops are too pricey for the average person;

Campgrounds

I would like to see soap dispensers in the campground bathrooms as a health and safety issue; It's very good except you should provide showers; Do something to limit the use of electric generators and excessive vehicle idling in the park. Exhaust and noise are pollutants; It would be nice to have hot showers in the campground, although I understand no park has this!; Showers in the campground would be a nice addition; Showers at Blackwoods would be nice;

Resource Management

Too much natural growth being allowed to happen, e.g. Tarn's weeds, Jordan Pond meadow's trees, Ocean Drive's saplings; Continue emphasizing the importance of visitors staying to the marked trails;

Congestion/Crowding/Visitor Experience

The carriage road was great; The crowded visitor center did not appear to offer and understanding of the park beyond a terrain map and auditorium; We were blown away by the variety, beauty, and natural settings. We will be back again and again. Thank you; Construction on Jordan Pond Trail too intrusive; I think this is a superb park for all sorts of outdoor recreation—beautiful, well managed, much variety, exquisite; We hiked, birdwatched, explored tidepools, and attended programs, and our kids (ages 4 and 7) are Jr. Rangers. Everything was wonderful. Acadia is truly a treasure—its people and the environment; Trail upgrading detracts, especially at Ship Harbor. Too sanitized; Park service seems to be trying to attract more people while at the same time to contain them; Has ability to accommodate thousands at any time; We were not happy to see sightseeing buses driving around the loops—this must stop; Dogs should be allowed on Sand Beach. At most, you should ban them only from 9am to 5pm; Thank you. We enjoyed the natural beauty of the park. Peaceful tranquility. Tape was worthwhile purchase; Suggestion design a pass for motorcycles that is visible on the bike so we don't have to stop, remove gloves and find ticket in pocket; Parking lots dangerous and way too crowded; Excellent mountain biking opportunities on the carriage paths. Wide range of hiking opportunities for all fitness levels; We have returned to Seawall for several years because we find it peaceful and beautiful; The recreational opportunities are some of the best in the country. Something for everyone. Our favorite place; Recreation opportunities outstanding. We have been here ten times and love it;

Buses

I loved the bus service and that you could take your bike on it; New Island Explorer bus system is excellent idea; The Island Explorer is a wonderful addition to this park. It offered us many additional options without using the car; The free island shuttle service is great-very helpful in exploring the park; Wish the buses ran more often—need more buses. Excellent service; We really appreciated the Island Explorer bus and its friendly drivers; Bus system is fantastic—makes trails and carriage roads so much more accessible to those of us without cars! Good job!; I like the buses. Once we parked the RV, we didn't have to move it;

General Impressions

Thank you; Everything is excellent and enjoyable. Thank you; Great job Canada. Thank you; We've thoroughly enjoyed our first trip and hope to come again; Highly recommended; Well maintained park. Please keep up the good work and keep the park in good shape; Thank you for all of your work; Just keep it clean and beautiful; We really enjoyed Acadia. It was beautiful; We had a grand time and most certainly return; It's all good; This is a great place; Thoroughly enjoyed our experience; The first national park I've visited. Very good. It belongs to us all; Great. Other parks should learn from these rangers. Understaffed?; The park services in Acadia is one of the best I have encountered in my life. You are doing an excellent job;

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2002 GPRA survey showed that Acadia National Park met the national goals for satisfaction (IIa1) and significance (IIb1). As with "significance" in previous surveys, it is clear the park should focus on improving visitor understanding of the significance of our biological resources and rich cultural heritage. Visitors know Acadia is significant for its scenery and recreation opportunities. Inclusion of our mission statement in as many presentations and publications as possible and posting it prominently in public contact areas is one of many actions that may help with this.

REFERENCES

Jacobi, C. and R. Manning

- 1997 Applying the visitor experience resource protection process to Acadia National Park carriage roads: A summary of research and decision-making. Technical Report NPS/NESO-RNR/NRTR/98-5. December 1997. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. New England System Support Office. 23pp.

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- 1997 Strategic management plans: Acadia National Park, St. Croix Island International Historic Site, Maine Acadian Culture Project. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 72pp.

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**APPENDIX 1: ACADIA NP 2002 VISITOR SURVEY CARD DATA REPORT
(UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO)**

APPENDIX 2: SIGNIFICANCE COMMENTS

These are reported verbatim. Numbers refer to numbered response cards. Particularly interesting comments are highlighted in italics by the author.

1. The preservation of so much natural beauty and the opportunity for so many people to experience it without destroying it.
2. It is absolutely beautiful. Thank you for preserving it.
3. Acadia NP provides a protected area where the people of the United States can experience the rocky seashore, salt water estuaries, and freshwater ponds of America.
4. Unique natural history and heritage. *Extreme tranquility.*
5. The many different things to do. We always feel as if we get our moneys worth at the park.
6. To keep the natural beauty of the area preserved because it is unique to our country.
7. Dramatic, unique coastal vistas, carriage trail system, recreational opportunities, fairly “unspoiled.”
8. The history and beauty of the undeveloped and unspoiled Miane mountains and coast. It is important that it remains so for future generations.
9. It preserves some of America’s natural splendor for recreational use *into the future.*
10. *Clean, clear, air and water.* Plenty of recreation activities.
11. Preserving the beauty of nature God created for us to enjoy.
12. Wide variety in a small area, preserves coastline and protects from over development.
13. Spectacular natural beauty. Wide variety of activities. Please do all possible to keep this park clean and well kept. This park must be preserved and protected.
14. Preserves a scenic wonder for the people.
15. Preserving what bit of nature we have left.
16. The natural beauty which combines mountains oceans and ponds.
17. *coastal habitat, clean air and water, spruce fir forests, subalpine community, human history from Wabenaki people to today.*
18. The beauty of the area. The work of citizens to make this a national park, the dedication of citizens to make trails, roads, carriage trails, the native Americans and early Europeans.
19. Scenery beautiful.
20. The fact that it is kept “natural” – keeping the land and sights in their natural form and state and not developing the land.
21. A place to visit that is still natural and is not spoiled by commercial growth and is maintained in its beauty.
22. *preservation, education, recreation*
23. It’s the only full national park in the northeast, and it preserves accessible scenic wonders for average people.
24. Acadia has a little bit of everything on all levels. Whether someone is biking, birding, or driving, everyone can come away with an appreciation for nature and our environment and how to preserve them.
25. *It is a cultural historical resource of the state of Maine.*
26. Ability to walk freely and absorb the natural beauty.
27. Rugged scenic natural beauty indicative of the American spirit.

28. The park allows people from all over the world to view, be part of and respect the natural beauty of planet earth. *Hopefully it allows people to reflect on what is truly needed and how important natural habitats are to the world ecosystem.*
29. Unique pink granite shoreline. Only coastal mountains til Brazil.
30. Opens the seashore to everyone. I have been coming for 30 years and have seen very few rangers. Ships Harbor walk very difficult during renovations.
31. To preserve our natural resources so all can enjoy – not just the wealthy.
32. Beautiful unspoiled land. Diversity of terrain in a compact, accessible area.
33. Unique environment and beautiful mountain views of ocean.
34. Preservation of forest, coast, mountains for *future generation* to enjoy. Incredible views, interesting and challenging hiking, biking, sailing.
35. It preserves a national treasure/beautiful, open, wild land and keeps it accessible to all who want to visit it.
36. The unique location, recreational, sports and environment.
37. Diversity of land masses (geography). *Opportunities for solitude.*
38. Beautiful location, national treasure, the “crown jewel” of the Atlantic Coast. Rivals Big Sur and northern Pacific coast.
39. This park provide the U.S. and the world the opportunity to experience and appreciate the beauty of our country in a friendly atmosphere and no expense.
40. Preservation of its ecosystem and allowing access to all Americans, not just a few.
41. Preserves and makes available for public use a beautiful section of Maine seashore and coastal mountains. Unique and important national treasure.
42. The preservation of the beauty of shore, the land, the wildlife, for our *future children* to learn from and love also.
43. Citizen access to national treasures like this park is essential, both for unrestricted recreation and education that will result in a heightened sensitivity to conservation.
44. The undisturbed treasure. Natural beauty—not commercialized.
45. Representative of (East) coastal environment. Also the culmination of private land donations to ensure enjoyment by *future generations*.
46. Undeveloped open land for public use.
47. Highest point on east coast.
48. I suppose it’s protecting a certain geologic habitat. It certainly is providing a large number of people with recreation opportunities
49. History of area, beauty of land.
50. Preserving the coastline and land for *future generations*.
51. It preserves the natural beauty of the Maine coast.
52. *This park has a history that comes alive while here.* Very nice.
53. Excellent set ups for bike riders.
54. Preserving and maintaining this magnificent part of America.
55. Great time with our bicycles on the trails/paths.
56. I feel that it is important to preserve our natural habitats, so that we can enjoy unspoiled lands.
57. Unique, beautiful terrain in an historic area.
58. Environment keep as natural as possible. A major scenic area.
59. Its natural beauty. Breathtaking scenery.

- 60. *Beauty and tranquility of trails, vistas.*
- 61. Acadia is the “gem” of the northeast. We come every summer and always have new places to explore. It’s so important to preserve all our national parks-they may be the only places that will stay the same in 100’s of years.
- 62. Unique natural land forms, beauty.
- 63. The foresight of those who donated the land for all others to enjoy.
- 64. To preserve a beautiful piece of land where the mountains meet the sea.
- 65. Beautiful countryside, fantastic hiking trails.
- 66. Exceptional variety, beauty, historical interest.
- 67. To keep the island preserved. The carriage roads free of motor vehicles so it can be enjoyed by *generations to come*.

Responses made that do not match significance statements.

- 68. It is absolutely breathtaking.
- 69. 1st national park east of the Mississippi.
- 70. Significant as only major national park in northeast.
- 71. A wonderful place which should be protected and enjoyed by everyone.
- 72. Rare place.
- 73. Location.

Responses made that do not relate to significance statements.

Never heard of national significance. Only that Rockefeller’s owned it.

The first national park I visited! Very good. It belongs to us all.

The national significance is questionable, however, what a wonderful place we live to have public services at such a magnificent place.

The park services in Acadia is one of the best I have encountered in my life. You are doing an excellent job.